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ABSTRACT

There are many pros and cons to the recent trend of early reading. The opponents fear that too much emphasis on early reading may lead to a less rounded development of the child; they agree on providing the child with richer and more varied experiences to insure reading readiness. The advocates believe that today's children have already had more and varied experiences and thus are more ready for reading activities at an earlier age than used to be the case. Some recent research studies have attempted to prove that (1) early readers do maintain their lead in reading achievement, (2) early readers have better attitudes towards reading, (3) there is no evidence that early reading is harmful to a child's eyesight, and (4) early reading will not result in psychological and social problems. However, the whole issue of early reading remains unresolved. Little research has been done to substantiate claims of the effects of early reading. Many of the criticisms center on questions regarding kindergarten teachers' background for teaching reading, problems of organizing instruction, and current reading programs. Advocates of early reading should feel a pressing need to provide better guidelines grounded in related research. References are included. (AW)

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TOTALITY IN READING INSTRUCTION

Pros and Cons of Teaching Reading to Four- and Five-Year-Olds

The teaching of reading to four- and five-year-olds (and even younger as evidenced by How To Teach Your Baby to Read, [5]) has been a long and hotly debated topic among educators and a source of anxiety to parents. Traditionally, the elementary school curriculum sets the beginning of reading instruction at grade one--in deference to the popular idea that six is the age when most children can successfully learn to read, and the fact that some school systems have no kindergartens. In the late fifties and early sixties a number of experiments (3, 6, 7, 12) demonstrated that children can successfully learn to

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read at ages 5, 4, and even 3 and 2. These studies, popularized in magazines and newspapers, were combined with the child development movement away from leaving all to maturation and toward nurturing learning abilities instead. Pressure from both educators and parents to begin reading at earlier ages was felt. Opponents and advocates of early reading took sides and there was a surge of research on such topics as reading in the kindergarten and characteristics of early readers. The trend of bringing youngsters to reading at younger ages has clearly arrived and can be easily seen in the profusion of parent-teach-your-preschooler-books and workbooks, the bandwagon of readiness programs, and even the conscious orientation of children's television programs such as "Sesame Street" teaching letters and word families to preschoolers. Today the controversy over early reading has changed focus from the question, "Can children under six years of age learn to read?" to the following questions: "Why should they read earlier?", "What are the benefits of reading early?", "To whom should early reading instruction be given?" These questions should be raised seriously now that the trend to early reading is gaining momentum.

Why preschoolers and kindergarteners should learn to read.

Advocates feel that nowadays more children are ready for reading activities at an earlier age than used to be the case. They maintain that children today have changed in many ways and are involved in more varied activities than their counterparts of preworld War II days. They (3, 8, 13) point to studies showing today's children's greater vocabulary, to the explosion in communication industries and greater

mobility which have given many children more and varied experiences including greater exposure to the printed word. They also emphasize the growing number of children who have attended nursery school and other preschool programs which they maintain are not unlike traditional kindergarten. While children have changed in the past fifteen to twenty years, they contend that the kindergartens of today have remained relatively static. Supporters of early reading argue that kindergartens should re-evaluate their curriculum, adjust to individual differences, and provide suitable activities including reading for the child of today. They believe that many kindergarten children are ready and eager to read and would profit from instruction. They feel that past practices have ignored the instructional needs of children who come to kindergarten reading books. To underscore their case they point to the example of the preschooler who comes to kindergarten reading books but has to await the end of the first grade reading readiness period before the teacher lets him read his first preprimer.

Why children shouldn't learn to read early.

Many of the opponents and others with reservations (1,10) about early reading would agree that the kindergarten child today should be treated differently than his older counterparts of 15-20 years ago, but agreement ends on whether early reading is one of the ways to do it. Possibly this view is best summed up by the question, "Is reading instruction the best use to make of the ages of three, four, and five?" There is the fear that too much emphasis on early reading may lead to a less rounded development of the child because skills in the social and

sensory-motor areas will receive less attention. Instead, it is argued that the emphasis at this age should involve a more horizontal approach--a development of a solid foundation of experiences, a broadening of these experiences, a consolidation of learnings--an insurance that almost all children would be more apt to be ready for reading activities. For instance, Ames (1), director of research at the Gesell Institute of Child Development, comments that a delay in reading instruction would be a preventative measure in avoiding nearly all reading failure. She feels that children who are pushed into reading too soon may never read as well as they would have, had instruction been delayed. Instead of early reading she recommends giving children richer and more varied experiences.

Effects of early reading

Claims of benefits and counter-claims of harmful consequences abound in the literature. The facts to substantiate each claim are few and can be seen in the following discussion of four such claims.

1. Children who get an early start in reading will have only a temporary advantage over children who begin reading in first grade. Although Vernon's (18) study of early readers in England and Scotland found that their initial advantages in reading achievement were not necessarily maintained in the intermediate grades, most recent investigations indicate that the early starter does maintain his lead. Durkin's (8) longitudinal studies of preschool readers reported higher achievement over equally bright non-early readers--even when instruction was not adjusted to the abilities of some of the early readers. In a study of kindergarten instruction in reading, Sutton (16) offered a program of

beginning reading instruction the second semester of kindergarten with a total of "not more than 20 hours kindergarten time." She also found the early readers achieving higher reading scores at the end of third grade. In Brezeinski's study (3) of early reading involving 4,000 students, the Denver public schools taught beginning reading to experimental kindergarten groups. On entrance to first grade these groups were divided and placed either in a traditional or an adjusted instructional program. By the fifth grade, it was found that early readers who had the adjusted instruction scored significantly higher on tests of reading vocabulary, comprehension, rate, and study skills than their counterparts who began reading in first grade. However, the early readers, who were put back into traditional programs without the adjusted instruction, lost their early advantage and scored similarly to the later starters.

One often raised criticism of research in early reading is that the findings are frequently based on a selective sample of highly advantaged bright children. However, the Denver study (3) involved 4,000 kindergarteners including below average children. Durkin's (7) study included children with IQ's as low as 91. Bereiter's (2) study of teaching reading to four-year-olds of different socio-economic backgrounds reported that lower class children could be brought to the 1.1 level by the first year and to the 2.6 grade level by the end of the third year. As research has shown that many different types of kindergarteners can profit from early reading, Durkin (7) has speculated that slow learners might especially benefit from an early start. She reasons that the longer periods of time involved would allow for a more

gradual introduction of reading activities suitable to the slower child's learning rate.

2. Early readers will have better attitudes towards reading. That many advocates see some of the benefits of early reading in terms of a better attitude toward reading and a greater interest in books may be inferred from the following remarks gathered from the literature: "Pupils were described by their teachers as 'book hungry'." (16), "Children should be taught to read as early as possible because this is one of the few keys to building a lifelong desire to read." (13), and "A kindergartener wants to learn to read....He'll never be better motivated." (17). This topic surprisingly, considering its importance, has received little research interest, and many of the studies considering it do so only as a side effect of their main study. Brezeinski (3), using the quantity of independent reading as an index of enjoyment and interest in reading, reported that an early or accelerated reading program enhanced interest in reading for a period of several years (second, third and fourth grade) but at the fifth grade level this lead disappeared and no significant differences were apparent. In Kelley's experiment cited by Downing (6), children's end of the year's attitudes toward kindergarten reading were measured on a self-reporting inventory. Kelley first devised a pilot program in which an experimental kindergarten group could choose if they wanted to be given reading instruction or not. Preliminary evaluation revealed that, by the second grade, the early kindergarten readers were not only significantly advanced in reading skills, but also more positive in their attitudes to reading.

However, when Kelley set up a full scale scientific research, the experimental group included both those who wished to read and those that did not. It was then found that the control group who had no kindergarten reading had more favorable attitudes.

3. Early reading is harmful to a child's eyesight. Curiously, although this is one of the oldest and most commonly voiced arguments against early reading, few facts are really known today. Holmes (9), in a summary of the research on visual hazards in early reading stated, "There is little experimental evidence dealing with changes in children's eyes between the ages of two and five years of age with or without the imposition of the task of learning to read." He points out that there seems to be very little evidence to support theories that teaching reading after age four leads to increase in myopia (nearsightedness). Looking at the several longitudinal studies of preschool and kindergarten readers (3, 7, 16) found in the literature, none of reported significant differences between early readers and later starters in number of sight defects.

4. Early reading will result in psychological and social problems. Teaching children to read early results in too much pressure, boredom, confusion, frustration, more reading problems, and psychosocial maladjustment. The above are among the many predictions of dire consequences resulting from teaching three-, four-, and five-year-olds to read. That these are mostly supported by well publicized personal opinions is shown in a search through the number of investigations that deal with the issue. In the six-year study of early reading in the

Denver schools, Brezeinski (3) found that early reading neither created problems nor prevented the problems of reading disabilities and harmful social and psychological effects. Other investigations (7, 16) have reached similar conclusions.

Problems in the kindergarten

Many of the criticisms of teaching reading early seem centered not so much on the question of "should children read early," but on the question regarding kindergarten teachers' background for teaching reading, problems of organizing instruction, and current reading programs. Several recent surveys (4, 11) would suggest that some teachers do not have the necessary background of knowledge to give reading instruction. Ching (4) found that there were very wide differences in reading preparation as measured by number of college reading courses taken, ranging from 0-32 in a sample of 931 California kindergarten teachers. Furthermore, school systems interested in adopting early reading may meet resistance from some teachers. One survey (11) of 500 teachers found that many teachers believed that "the few who are ready to read comprise so small a minority that it is not worth revising the present kindergarten program."

A second problem revolves around the degree to which the kindergarten can practically and effectively organize reading instruction that will meet the needs of each child. Downing (6) who has reported successful experiments with early readers in Great Britian, maintains "the younger the pupils, the greater the need for an individual approach." The current kindergarten picture with a high pupil-teacher ratio , a wide

range of differences in readiness and experience, and short class time are seen as adding to the difficulty of organizing reading programs that not only fit the situation, but also fit the needs of the child. Two surveys of current kindergarten programs (4,11) report that a common practice gaining momentum in kindergartens is the "mass instruction" approach in which all the kindergarteners in the class are taught together in the same reading program. Both advocates and opponents of early reading have expressed doubts whether all children in any one class would profit from the same early reading instruction given at the same pace.

Many critics are skeptical of the way the idea of early reading has been translated into classroom practices. Discussing past visits to kindergarten classrooms where reading was taught, Hymes (10) and Sheldon (14) expressed deep concerns over the serious no-nonsense atmosphere, the silent passive learning, the pencil-pushing activities, and the irrelevant materials--all of which they felt were too often characteristics of the programs. Critics also argue that some current kindergarten reading programs are actually poorly diluted copies of the first grade reading program without adequate adjustments for kindergarten differences. If, perhaps, there is some truth to these arguments, these abuses could be partly accounted for by the fact that teachers have few guidelines on what materials, methods,and general procedures can be effectively used. Research studies comparing different programs have constantly found contradictory results. Little research interest has been given to the possibility that some methods and materials will be more suitable for certain kindergarten children than for others.

Some Reflections

The whole issue of early reading remains unresolved, and for many clouded in emotional appeals, extreme claims, and misunderstandings of terminology. Opponents especially have been guilty of confusing the problem by using negative emotional appeals of the "being cheated out of childhood" and "pushed into learning" varieties. While these make lively reading, they also help to block intelligent discussion. In the same vein, the extremes of the argument--"all children should begin reading early" and "no child should read early" should not be generalized and attributed as the views of the majority of both opponents and advocates. Most people concerned with early reading fall well between the polar extremes and attach certain conditions to their arguments. Further misunderstanding occurs as Smith (15) observes through different conceptions of terminology. What does a writer mean when he argues that young children should be taught to read early? How "early?" By "reading" does he mean mainly teaching word analysis skills or does he include teaching sight vocabulary and comprehension skills? What does he mean by "teaching?" It is interesting to speculate how the issue of early reading would become more manageable, if the emotional appeals and extremes were disregarded and each writer would explain his conception of the terminology.

Clearly, the pros and cons of early reading will not be resolved until more facts are known. Too much time and effort have been wasted on opinions of what may happen and reaction to these opinions. There actually is little research (although what there is has been widely

publicized) to substantiate claims of the effects of early reading. Of the research available it can tentatively be said:

1. Most studies lend support to the claim that children that have an early start in reading will exhibit higher reading achievement than their later starting counterparts and will maintain this advantage especially if adjusted instruction is provided. This finding underlines the importance that school systems, interested in implementing early reading programs, realize a total commitment--not merely a change in the kindergarten program but necessary changes adjusting instruction in other grades as well.

2. There is an indication that attitudes of kindergarteners towards reading may be partly related to the teacher's selection of children to participate in the early reading program. In two studies (6, 16) where kindergarten children could choose whether or not they wanted to join the reading program, the children seemed to enjoy reading more than their counterparts. Perhaps, for those children who are not interested in reading, the teacher should spend more time "selling" them on books and building motivation so they will be more eager to read at a later time.

3. So little is known about the effects of early reading on eyesight that even the most enthusiastic advocates should take cautious note.

4. Early reading seems neither to create or prevent reading disabilities, problems of boredom, school adjustment, nor psychological problems. These problems, however, can be attributed to poor teaching and inappropriate methods and materials used in instruction. Advocates

of early reading should feel a pressing need to provide better guidelines grounded in research about different organizational plans, reading approaches, methods, materials, and their suitability for different kindergarten children. If better guidelines are not provided, it seems likely that some questionable current practices will continue and critics will find their evidence of harmful effects.

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